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AUTHOR Monaco, Theresa M.; Goodner, Jane
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ABSTRACT

Most typical high school programs are not meeting the needs of gifted and talented students. Programs for the gifted are often neither interdisciplinary nor differentiated as encouraged by Texas state guidelines. Gifted students can gain much from well-designed extracurricular activities. Grade weighting schemes in which gifted courses are weighted no heavier than honors classes may dissuade students who are competitive for class honors from taking such courses. They can be encouraged to select gifted classes by being offered class-associated extracurricular opportunities. Such activities provide hands-on learning experiences, develop social relationships, and improve student motivation. Academic contests and group excursions to plays and ballet performances may also provide gifted students with extracurricular challenges they would not ordinarily encounter in the school environment. (DB)

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The "Extra" in Extracurricular Activities for Gifted

by Theresa Monaco and Jane Goodner

All students benefit from well planned, exciting extracurricular events. What student wouldn't delight in a break from class room routines and assignments? But the benefit for gifted and talented students from extracurricular activities is potentially as valuable as curricular activities. Most typical high school programs are not meeting the needs of gifted and talented students. Furthermore, most high school programs are neither differentiated nor interdisciplinary in structure as suggested by the Texas Guidelines for Implementing Programs for Gifted Students (1979). The curriculum for the gifted program in high school is left largely to the discretion of the particular classroom teacher chosen for the assignment in their a particular field. The teacher of the gifted English class, for example, teaches four other sections of English in the regular curriculum. Usually, no attempt at interdisciplinary work is made because in high school the courses of study are so specialized that only a certified English teacher could teach the English curriculum to the gifted class, and this English teacher would not even attempt to teach gifted science or math. Somehow, teachers must differentiate the curriculum in the gifted program,

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otherwise, the gifted population is not being served as prescribed by state and federal law.

Gifted students in high school are young adults who largely determine their own course of studies. Certainly by their junior or senior years, gifted students chose or do not chose which courses they take and what level or work they want to attempt. Students in the last years of the gifted program may not chose gifted classes unless they have a clear cut reason to do so. According to Texas' "no pass, no play" rule, students may not participate in extracurricular activities if they are failing a class. Students become very wary of taking any class that may jeopardize their participation in the sports or the activities they enjoy.

In most high schools, the grade weighting for gifted classes is the same as for honors classes. A student making a "B" in an honors or gifted class receives as much credit as a student who makes "A" in a regular class, but the weighted grade for the gifted class is no higher than the weighted grade for honors. Gifted students achieve at higher levels, produce better quality work, and generally out perform their counterparts in the honors programs. Yet gifted students do not receive extra grade point benefits from their work. Why would students consistently sign up for the more demanding gifted classes when they are not rewarded by the system? Naturally, the academic gains

should be reason enough, but make no mistake about it, most of the gifted high school students are in the running for class honors: valedictorian, salutatorian, the top ten, magna cum laude. These honors are extremely important to these achievement oriented gifted students and the competition among them is often intense.

This leads to the question of course choice. If the honors class and the gifted class both receive equal grades in a weighted grade system, the student must have some good reason for choosing the more demanding course. I believe that extracurricular activities can make the choice of the gifted high school course well worth the effort. Last year I offered my gifted senior English students a variety of extracurricular opportunities. The students learned a great deal from these experiences. Also, the extra time together had a unifying effect among the class members. Another advantage was that the students and I related better in informal social settings. This bonding carried over to ~~the~~ classroom and affected learning in a positive way.

The academic gains from worthwhile, appropriate extracurricular events are tremendous. Students experience learning first hand. Sensory learning is as advantageous at the high school level as at the elementary level. These students learned by going, doing, seeing, hearing, and enjoying. When extracurricular experiences are coupled with

meaningful classroom activities and discussions, the curriculum is much more meaningful and exciting.

I strongly believe that the older gifted students need to be challenged and stretched. I sponsor several academic contests in which gifted students compete with each other and with students all over the state for top honors. The Texaco Star Challenge is a wonderful contest in a television game show format. A team of four students compete against teams from other high schools. The winners progress each week in academic matches which are televised by Texaco. Texaco conducts training seminars for the coaches, provides sample questions for student practice, and tapes of the semifinal and final matches from the previous years. The winners are given sizeable scholarships to the colleges of their choice. Last year I held open try outs for the Texaco Challenge Team. Because of the many conflicts with band, football and drill team practice, the students met in my home twice a week at night to practice. We used Trivia Pursuit questions and a "buzzer" to simulate the real game show. Ten to twelve students came to every three hour practice session, even though they were active in other extracurricular activities.

The four finally chosen for the team were all from my gifted program. In fact, only one student who came to practice sessions was not in my gifted class. Their enthusiasm was so great that I did not really mind the extra

hours that I had to work with them. I really enjoyed it. One of the students kept score each night, and we chose the final team by counting total correct responses. You wouldn't think that a simple game show would elicit much excitement or competition, but the effect was staggering. Most of these competitive students were beside themselves to answer correctly and outscore their friends, even in practice sessions. They learned quite a bit of "trivia" and some worthwhile information, but most of all they had fun. Our team lost in the first round, unfortunately, but it was close! Anyway, last year was our first year. We'll be ready next year. I guess I'm competitive, too.

The hardest working group of students I coach after school is the University Interscholastic League (UIL) Literary Criticism team. We started the year with fifteen to twenty members. I took three students to a special UIL training conference for coaches and participants in October at Sam Houston University in Huntsville. By mid term half had dropped out because of the competition. Finally, the UIL team was narrowed to three for district competition. Our students placed first and second in district, first in region, and fourth in state competition last year. The year before, they placed fourth and sixth in state UIL competition. All these district, regional, and state winners were gifted and talented students. They loved the competition, the hours spent studying after school, and

incredibly, they loved the work. The trips to contests were certainly learning experiences, but they were also enjoyable. One of the students said that the extra time spent in our work sessions was comparable to a college course in literature. I know that the students thought this endeavor was worthwhile because of the hours they were willing to devote to studying and attending work sessions. The students who advanced to region and state competition realized they were competing with the best students in the area and the state. Their self-esteem grew as much as their knowledge of literary criticism.

Work on contests is extremely valuable, but time consuming and flat hard work. We did have some entertainment in our extracurricular activities through the arts. Last year I arranged several trips to Houston for cultural presentations. The junior and senior gifted English classes saw the Houston Ballet's Christmas production of The Nutcracker at the new Wortham Center in December. Some students had never attended the ballet and were really impressed. The students were even able to talk with some of the stars after the performance and get their autographs.

We attended two fabulous theatrical performances at Houston's Stages Theater in their student program. Stages gave us student rates of $5.00 a ticket for $18.00 - $25.00 seats. About 30 students attended splendid performances of

Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird and William Shakespeare's Macbeth in February and March. We read To Kill a Mockingbird as an outside reading assignment and Macbeth as part of the prescribed senior English curriculum. The students' reactions to both productions was tremendous. The discussions on the bus on the way home were astonishing. The students wanted to talk about everything they saw. The staging of both plays was so dramatic that it fired their imaginations. Macbeth was especially dramatic. In its presentation, Stages presented Shakespeare's three witches as nuns in disguise. This really astounded the students. All of Shakespeare's lines were identical to those they had studied in the text, but the unusual staging added a world of new interpretations to the play. Even at 12 pm, after a long day at school, they were still excited and anxious to discuss the meaning of the play, the accuracy of the presentation, the author's real intent, the use of "stage" blood, and the nuns, in particular. In the final fight between MacDuff and MacBeth, the actors had "blood" on their hands and swords. When they attacked each other, they splashed blood all over the students in front row. I was on the second row I was also hit. Their eyes grew larger and larger, they sat on the edges of their seats, they were not just watching the scene, they were participants! The climax was reached when MacDuff came in with MacBeth's "head" on a pole and stuck it in the ground right in front of us. I've

never seen or heard students as excited about Shakespeare before. They finally understood why Shakespeare's works have been popular for 400 years. Reading a play from the text book is nothing like live, dramatic theater. I was thrilled that they were able to see such an excellent production.

Stages sent us student study guides, discussion questions, and teacher suggestions for both performances. They also held a session after each performance in which the students could talk with the actors about the play. I am grateful to Stages for their student program, which is affordable, educational, and of the highest theatrical quality.

The students didn't always have to learn from our extracurricular events. We attended Houston's Theater Under the Stars' presentation of Forty-Second Street which was just pure entertainment. Songs, choreography, fantastic stage designs, and a great story made this a most enjoyable trip.

Planning these trips involved many hours of work, but I believe it is worth it. Also, a particularly resourceful student helped me by making telephone calls to arrange tickets and writing letters of confirmation. Parents also helped by driving into Houston on occasion to pick up tickets. I paid for the tickets when I knew how many wanted to attend. Then the students paid me back. This could have

been risky, but I never lost money on these transactions. Some students were slow bringing in their ticket money, but I finally broke even every time.

I plan to continue my contest work and the trips to plays and ballets next year. I always ask the students what they want to do. For example, they requested The Nutcracker last year. I wouldn't have thought the ballet would have been their first choice. I never give extra credit or grades for participation in extracurricular activities because some students can't come because of costs or work. We did provide some tickets for those students who couldn't afford them, but we couldn't underwrite all costs. The benefit to the students was way beyond that of grades. Hopefully, they gained an appreciation of the arts and a love of academic competition. These are two treasures they can draw upon for the rest of their lives.

Through extracurricular programs students in high school gifted classes can have the differentiated curriculum that provides them the kind of academic advantages they deserve. Extracurricular activities can provide cultural growth, social experience, academic gains, and a worthwhile incentive to participate in the high school gifted program.